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ABSTRACT

The 1992 report of the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) and several other recent studies and publications addressing the nation's changing labor force development needs, particularly as they concern instruction in English language skills for the workplace, are discussed briefly, and five aspects of this issue often neglected are examined in greater detail: (1) the characteristics, diversity, and special needs of language minorities; (2) linguistic considerations of this diverse group, including time factors in second language learning, student readiness for content-area instruction (academic skills), and potential for mis-match of student and teacher expectations; (3) cultural considerations, particularly the differences in behavior and attitude patterns of "cultures of doing" and "cultures of being;" (4) implications of these factors for schools, specifically as they concern curriculum, program design, and classroom teaching techniques; and (5) implications for student assessment and programs accountability. Contains 17 references. (MSE)

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Technical Assistance for
English Language Training Projects
1997-1998

Sponsored by the
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by Allene Guss Grognet

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Preparing Limited English Proficient Adults for the Workplace and the SCANS Skills

by Allene Guss Grognet

Why are students emerging from our high schools unprepared for the workplace? This problem is discussed in the report of the Secretary's commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS). *Learning and Living: What Work Requires of Schools*, addresses this question and also outlines recommendations to help schools teach students the skills they need to be productive citizens. What is unique about these SCANS findings is that the Commissioners were aware of and took seriously the special challenges posed by the large number of limited English proficient (LEP) workers who will be entering the workforce in the year 2000. Issues of Language and Culture were specifically addressed in the SCANS monograph.

Several recent reports, including the 1990 Census Report, paint a vivid picture of the changing American workforce. If we look at population growth during the 1890-1990 decade, we find an overall 53 percent growth in Hispanic populations and a staggering 107.8 percent growth in Pacific Islander populations. Newcomers among these populations tend to have limited proficiency in English. Add to this the approximately 370,000 LEP refugees from Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Africa who have entered the Unites States in the same decade (as documented in the 1990 Refugee Reports), and the numbers grow and become more diverse.

In addition to the census figures, Johnston and Packer point out in *Workforce 2000: Work and Workers for the 21st Century* (1987) that "immigration will represent the largest share of the increase in the population and the workforce since the first World War. There is no question that both the workforce and out schools will be more culturally diverse in their demographic make-up, and that the preparation of future workers must include methods and techniques that address the SCANS skills and competencies in a linguistically and culturally sensitive manner.

What Work Requires of Schools is about high-skill environments and high-wage environments. (See also, *Workplace Basics: The skills Employers Want.)* Both books focus on the "work-place know-how" that employers seek in workers. The know-how identified by SCANS is made up of five competencies and a three-part foundation of skills and personal qualities needed for solid job performance. These are:

COMPETENCIES. Effective workers can productively use:

- **Resources:** allocating time, money, materials, space, staff;
- **Interpersonal Skills:** working on teams, teaching others, serving customers, leading, negotiating, and working well with people from culturally diverse backgrounds;

- **Information:** acquiring and evaluating data; organizing and maintaining files, interpreting information, and using computers to process information;
- **Systems:** understanding social, organizational, and technological systems, monitoring and correcting performance, and designing or improving systems;
- **Technology:** selecting equipment and tools, applying technology to specific tasks, and maintaining and troubleshooting technologies.

THE FOUNDATION SKILLS. Competence requires:

- **Basic Skills:** listening, speaking, reading, writing, arithmetic and mathematics;
- **Thinking Skills:** thinking creatively, making decisions, solving problems, seeing things in the mind's eye, knowing how to learn, and reasoning;
- **Personal Qualities:** individual responsibility, self esteem, sociability, self management and integrity.

The report is a huge step forward in connecting schools and workplaces, and in recognizing that students need to start acquiring the above skills and competencies at an early age. Students born in the United States who are native speakers of English already have two important "tools" — English language and U.S. culture — with which to learn the foundations skills and master the competencies. Language-minority students usually do not. To illustrate, acquiring and evaluating data assume one speaks or reads English, and needs only to learn about identifying data sources, retrieving data, and evaluation techniques, and allocating time resources assumes that everyone has the same cultural concept and value of time.

By not glossing over language and culture as critical factors in acquiring workplace skills, the SCANS Commission has contributed to a new and healthy trend. The majority of articles, reports, and books on workplace skills that have appeared in the past few years neglect linguistic and cultural aspects at best, and make light of them at worst. The major aspects to be carefully considered are: (1) language minority students, (2) linguistic considerations, (3) cultural considerations, (4) implications for schools, and (5) implications for assessment and accountability.

Language Minority Students

What work requires of Schools assumes that skills and competencies will be performed in English, and not at a simple proficiency level at that. It also assumes that foundation skills and competencies will be learned in English or, if learned in one's native language, will be quickly transferred to English.

It should be noted that language-minority students are a diverse group — ethnically, linguistically, and culturally. Some are ready to acquire skills outlined by SCANS, but others need special support or the opportunity for language development before they are ready to compete with native English-speaking peers. Those deserving special attention include the following:

Students who have little English, but have strong academic preparation in their home countries need to develop the linguistic skills necessary to express their ideas in English. These students need the opportunity to acquire the interaction skills necessary to negotiate ideas across languages and cultures. As experience in high-tech and other complex work environments has shown, foreign-born professionals

with strong technical skills are often limited in their opportunities because they lack the social and linguistic skills deemed necessary for effective communications, team building, and conflict resolution. If these students, many of whom are very talented in scientific and technical fields, are to acquire SCANS skills related to communications and social interaction, they may need special classes that allow them to explore U.S. cultural concepts while developing their speaking and listening skills.

The author recently designed such a training for a group composed mainly of Russian Refugees studying in a community college. While students were highly trained technically, they could not communicate effectively in English about their subject, and many of those who spoke English were viewed by American so-workers as rude and arrogant.

In another situation, at the U.S. Patent Office, the author was part of a team that designed andtaught necessary language skills (e.g., communicating with lawyers on the telephone, handling legal briefs of patent claims) to a linguistically diverse population. These students and their English-speaking supervisors also participated in seminars addressing cultural diversity in the workplace.

Students who have strong oral English skills but weak or nonexistent literacy skills. Many of these students have strong oral interaction skills such as those developed in the streets and on the playground, but lack the academic skills necessary to access information, cope with extended texts, solve abstract problems, and deal with hypothetical situations. They need programs that will upgrade their oral English skill and prepare them to benefit from academic, vocational, or job-training classes.

Students who lack both oral English interaction and the literacy skills necessary to access information, express ideas, and solve communications problems in English. Generally, these students may also lack cultural coping skills. They need strong developmental programs that help them acquire the language, literacy, and cultural skills needed to learn and work in the United States.

Linguistic Considerations

"Acquiring English language skills" can mean many things. It may refer to all around listening, speaking, reading, and writing, or it may only refer to the social language necessary for shopping in a supermarket. Or, it may refer solely to the academic language necessary to study a school subject. "Language" in these situations is not necessarily interchangeable.

What Work Require of Schools covers the areas of listening, speaking (oral communications), reading, and writing. However, there a re differences between social language (e.g., face-to-face conversation on a concrete topic, such as "small talk") and academic language, which is crucial to the acquisition of SCANS skills. Linguistic researcher J. Cummins, for example, finds that characteristically, social and interpersonal language is concrete, informal, contextualized, and cognitively undemanding, whereas cognitive and academic language is abstract, formal, decontextualized, and cognitively demanding.

In addition, researcher V. Collier has shown that it took three to five years for elementary LEP students to acquire social oral English equal to that of their peers, but a minimum of four to seven years for these same students to attain grade norms in oral academic English. The SCANS skills and competencies fall somewhere between the social and academic poles, but they clearly tend to be closer to the latter than the former.

Many of the uses of language are implicit to a culture and not explicitly taught. Researcher S. Heath enumerates some of the ways in which schools expect children to be able to use English before they begin formal schooling. (For the most part, these expectations are implicit, rather than explicit, and can cause frustration for both student and teacher when they are not met.) Students are expected to use language to label and describe objects, events, and information: recount past events or information; follow directions from oral sources without needing sustained personal reinforcement; sustain and maintain the social interaction of the group; and obtain and clarify information.

If teachers expects such linguistic behavior in kindergarten, consider the mismatch of expectations that occurs when a student is an adult and still cannot perform the above tasks in English, which may be the case for most LEP students. For example, think of the GED LEP students grappling with a physics experiment on magnetism. Even if they had strong academic preparation in their home country, they would need to learn and use language to follow directions (*first, second, next, then,* etc.) and to understand content obligatory terms (*attract, repel, magnetic, properties, magnetic fields*) prepositions of location (*to, from, near*) ; and descriptive modifiers (*describing, for example, the patterns that iron shaving make on paper when a magnet is used).*

Similarly in math, following directions to solve a problem involves not only technical vocabulary, but also an understanding that *add, plus, combine, sum, more than and increased by* are all terms of addition. Students also need to be able to understand the syntactic difference between comparatives such as *greater than* and *less than* and prepositional phrases such as *divided into* and *divided by*.

Students, either high school of adult, without strong academic skills in their native language have an even harder time. Lack of academic English proficiency (and the critical thinking skills that accompany it) is the major reason for failure among language-minority students and has contributed to their high drop-out rates. Not even the contextualized and real-world orientation noted by *What Work Requires of Schools* will help LEP students unless direct attention is given to acquiring the oral language and literacy skills needed to successfully access the SCANS competencies. The English language needs to be the tool, not the barrier, to success.

Cultural Considerations

SCANS acknowledged that culture is a separate consideration for language-minority students in accessing SCANS skills and competencies. Since these skills and competencies reflect expectations of the American workplace, they necessarily assume a U.S. cultural concept of the world. That is a statement, not a criticism. Culture, like language, must be taught; cross-cultural situations need to be overtly set up so learners can acquire and understanding of different expected cultural behavior. Like acquiring a new language, cultural adaptation does not happen by osmosis.

If we look at culture as an iceberg, we can see that the behaviors we associate with culture are only the tip. Beneath the surface are the implicit and invisible beliefs, attitudes, and values that shape those behaviors. Surface culture includes such elements as food, dress, holidays, art, folklore, and physical carriage, whereas deep culture encompasses family ties, ethics, ownership, time, and space.

Anthropologists, linguists, and cross-cultural specialists have analyzed dominant cultural themes and have identified major values, or qualities, that seem to guide the behavior of people and form "deep"

cultures. Consider, for example, characteristics of cultures of doing and cultures of being:

Cultures of Doing	Cultures of Being
Task-oriented	Person-oriented
Earned status	Ascribed / inherited status
Flexible roles	Fixed roles
Nuclear family	Extended family
Change / movement	Stability / harmony / tradition
Need for achievement	Need for affiliation
Individualism	Belonging to a group
Future orientation	Past / present orientation
Monochronic	Polychronic

The above should be seen in terms of continuums rather than absolutes; cultures are somewhere along a continuum for each of the values noted. Without stereotyping one can say that U.S. culture is much closer to the "doing" pole than are either Hispanic or Asian cultures. A few examples:

Task Orientation. The first question asked in the United States is often "what do you do?" or "Where do you work?" rather than "Who are you?, What's your family name?, or Who are your relatives?".

Achievement. In our highly competitive society we value the success story, the myth of going from rags to riches, Horatio Alger, and the Abe Lincoln legend. We also talk about being Number One, leading the world, becoming bigger and better, and conquering the environment. Other cultures may have different priorities.

Individualism. Frequently, we expect every person to be independent, responsible, and self-respecting. We question seriously thoughts that the group should take precedence over the individual. The freedom of the individual is well-guarded by law.

Change and Movement. We are future-oriented. We put more emphasis on youth than age, on change rather than preservation. We see things "getting better tomorrow," talk about "progress," and advertise products as "new and different."

The above vignettes, like cultural attributes, are neither good nor bad. Formulations of this type are not precise and are often highly controversial. But despite their limitations, these generalizations can be useful in providing insights into the culture of society, and thus the patterned behaviors of its members. Culture determines the ways people behave, perceive the world, and evaluate the behavior of others. It is because of different cultural values that some Japanese see Americans as "lazy," while an American editorial described the Japanese as "bees." In a cultural values survey conducted by the author, U.S. students viewed many Asians as "very formal" or "shy": Asian and Latin American students described their U.S. counterparts as "brusque" and "rude"; and U.S. students characterized the Hispanic "abrazo" as "loud" and "demonstrative." Through different cultural eyes, the SCANS sociability category under Personal Skills, or the entire competency of Interpersonal Skills, obviously means different things.

Let's look at a few of the SCANS competencies through the cultural eye of a language-minority student.

Under **Resources**, time is a category. In the United States, there is a strong sense of time as a resource — something to be used, spent, saved, shred, and so on. We say "time is money," "Can you give me a few minutes of your time?" "a stitch in time saves nine." But in many cultures, a given time means something like "within a half-hour," not "on the dot." Even with the ability to express time in English, the underlying (and unstated) perception of time that a language-minority student holds may be very different from general U.S. perceptions.

Under **Interpersonal Skills,** exercising leadership is very difficult for a student raised in a culture of fixed roles, or a culture in which questioning a policy or procedure of a supervisor (or teacher) means that the supervisor "loses face." When the word "question" has meanings as various as "display initiative" and "be insubordinate," cultures are obviously in conflict.

Under **Information,** how one organizes information is culture-bound. It may be linear, as in the U.S., or convergent, as in many other cultures. Understanding and appreciating that systems or organization and information differ is cultural.

Under **Systems,** social and organizational systems differ from culture to culture — e.g., the difference between social and organizational systems in Japan and the United States. We have a saying that reflects our values and translates into behavior: "The squeaky wheel gets the oil." The Japanese also have a saying : "The nail that stands up gets hammered down."

What seems reasonable and important to a person in one culture may seem irrational and trivial to someone in another culture. This is not to say that language-minority students do not have the ability to acquire another layer of cultural skills. It says that for adults and young adults, these cultural skills must be explicitly taught.

On the other hand, in addressing the issue of cultural diversity in the workplace, SCANS recognized that cultural accommodation is a two-way street. It is also a continuous, nondiscrete process. In practice, the language-minority student or worker is, of necessity, the one who accommodates the most. But others must go at least a quarter of the way toward understanding and accepting that which is not only different but is inextricably bound to who we are and to our sense of self-esteem.

Implications for Schools

Following are some simple and yet challenging implications for schools: implications that emerge form the linguistic and cross-cultural need of language-minority students and that should be met if these students are to acquire the SCANS skills and to function competently in the American workplace.

- <u>The acquisition of oral and written English must be explicitly addressed</u> if language-minority students are to attain the necessary skills outlined by SCANS. Programs which foster the acquisition of social, academic, and vocational language proficiency need to be planned and developed. The trend in teaching ESL, both K-12 and adult levels, is toward content-based instruction, i.e. models in which language is the vehicle of instruction, not the object. Research shows that students attain a high level of second language development while mastering subject matter, be it academic or vocational. Practice has not caught up with theory yet; there are still more ESL classes teaching grammar rules than classes teaching how to ask and answer question, clarify and verify, give and follow

directions, describe, report, explain, and so on, in a meaningful academic or work context. However, on can say that the cutting edge of the ESL profession is in tune with the SCANS findings, and that models that truly integrate ESL and content instruction closely reflect SCANS suggestion — for example, the models of P. Richard-Amato and M.A. Snow, J. Crandall, and M. Belfiore and B. Burnaby.

- Schools must develop language-learning curricula that integrate the linguistic skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing within a context that relates academic skills to authentic workplace skills. For instance, the vocational curricula should not be completely separate from academics, or vice versa. Curricula must reflect the real-life tasks that individuals face, plus the appropriate academic endeavors.

- Appropriate instructional objectives must be established. These should include language (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), contextualized academic content, thinking or study skills, and cross-cultural skills.

- Schema, or background knowledge (including cultural knowledge), must be consciously developed in English. This is typically accomplished through oral language activities that precede and presentation on information or extensive reading and writing activities. For adults, this sets the stage for cross-cultural learning, integrated with language learning.

- A wide range of materials needs to be used in the classroom. Students should be able to interact with and produce a variety or texts, including maps, charts, graphs, tables, lists, timelines, diagrams, and reports. Authentic materials from academic content and work areas can be used, although it is often necessary to adapt information to make it maximally accessible to learners with lesser developed language. This does not mean that the material is simply watered down or made less conceptually rich. It does, however, require that the information be restructured so that the relationships among ideas are clear and new vocabulary is sufficiently contextualized. Ironically, the restructuring of large amounts of connected discourse often results in the presentation of information in other kinds of ways (such as tables or flow charts) that are particularly amenable to assimilation on the part of LEP students.

- A variety of media should be used to reduce an over-reliance on language as the sole means of conveying information or demonstrating meaning. Demonstrations, a wide range or audio-visual aids, and authentic materials and objects not only contextualize the language but often leave the student with visual cues for content recall.

- Experience, discovery, and hands-on, learning that encourage students to develop concepts and promote social interaction should be encouraged. These activities place language learning into relevant, meaningful contexts. Games, role-plays, experiments, and problem-solving situations are especially appropriate for acquiring both language and culture.

- Where possible, native languages should be used with adult students to explain and contrast. Many older students see themselves as somewhat limited in their ability to get good jobs. To successfully acquire the higher-level skills outlined by SCANS, language-minority students need programs that

value their language and culture, that show SCANS models from their linguistic and cultural perspective, and that lead to higher order thinking skills.

- School must address the extra disadvantage language-minority students face in relationship to technology. If they are to have equal access to technology, a key factor for future job competition, resources must be allocated so that schools in ethnic neighborhoods can install computers, train faculty, and develop curricula providing the kind of experience with technology that students in many middle-class families take for granted.

- SCANS competencies need to be explicitly pointed out to adults, making it easier for them to transfer those skills from one venue to another. For instance, in a lesson which looks at reading a pay stub, ask the students about budgets and how they make decisions about credit or cash, to show that allocating financial **Resources** is a competency that cuts across work and home. However, take care not to water down the SCANS competencies. Only look at two or three at a time, and look at them wholistically. It does no good to use a Chinese menu of pick and choose from column A and B technique, e.g. selecting a tool, allocating time, working with others, etc. Focus on the skills and competencies as "wholes", not "parts".

- Finally, the issue of culture must be addressed for language-minority students. For adults, this means explicitly teaching U.S. culture by comparing and contrasting values, attitudes, and behaviors from their cultures. Cross-cultural programs must value the home culture of the learner, adding an understanding of U.S. culture and not trying to eradicate what is already there. This gives students opportunities to build self-esteem. In addition, all schools must set a climate in which bilingualism and biculturalism are seen as resources rather than problems.

Implications for Assessment and Accountability

While one can point to trends in curriculum development and classroom techniques, there is less clarity in assessment. It is difficult to find valid assessments that measure proficiency in oral English, literacy, and cultural knowledge for adults. Standardized tests for reading, writing, or academic content, as they are now constituted, are inappropriate for students who are acquiring English. Such tests fail to provide an accurate measure of student knowledge and skills because they often require language, cultural knowledge, and test-taking skills that students may not have mastered.

There are, however, a few suggestions that may be helpful:

- Use more performance assessments, especially those less dependant on language skills. Alternative assessments, requiring integrated language skills, should be used whenever possible. Such assessments include observation of students performing authentic classroom or workplace tasks, checklists or direct descriptions of performance over time, demonstrations, student self-ratings, writing samples, learning journals, and oral and written tests which provide contextual clues to meaning.

- Keep in mind linguistic and cultural equity from the beginning of the process of developing assessment tools. Such tools will come out at a different point if language and culture are considered before the fact, rather than after the fact. A sensitivity to linguistic and cultural pitfalls must be an up-front pursuit rather than an editing job. That translates, for instance, into questions written in

English that use subject-verb-object word order as much as possible, that avoid the use of relative clauses (who, which, whom), that use pronouns judiciously, and that minimize the use of negatives ("...this is *not* an example of ...")

Culturally, sensitivity means being aware of cross-cultural differences and examining every test question for its cultural load. Assessment developers need to continually ask themselves if they assume that cultural conventions are shared by all cultures. In a given test item, for instance, do they rely on a cultural assumption in testing an altogether different skill or knowledge? A quantitative test item that uses a price label on a piece of pre-packaged meat may prove difficult for a language-minority student — not because of the computation difficulty, but because the underlying concept of pre-packaged meat is culturally foreign.

In short, test developers need to constantly ask themselves what they are assessing: skills, new knowledge, background knowledge, language, or culture. Test items need to be viewed through linguistic and cultural lenses. Are the instructions and the language of the test items more difficult than the task itself? Are cultural presuppositions embedded in the items?

- Adapt testing, e.g. oral testing should be considered as an alternative form of assessment for language-minority students. Literacy in English, when it is not integral to what is being tested, should not become a barrier to being assessed. Tests often fail to distinguish between situations in which the learner is unfamiliar with the language or concepts of the test items, and literacy problems in which the learner lacks the requisite reading and writing skill, but could easily respond to similar items presented as part of a conversation.

Demonstrations and oral tests that allow for clarification and negotiation of meaning can help to equalize the language barrier. Portfolio assessments, which focus information from a variety of assessment sources over a period of time, are probably the most valid measure of progress for LEP students. Using information from diverse sources rather than relying on a single measure can also interpret the results of standardized tests in light of these other information sources.

Finally, giving more time to LEP students to complete tasks, and using bilingual dictionaries where appropriate, all contribute to participation of LEP students in formal classroom strategies.

- Testing in the native language, where applicable, can be a workable alternative. This is especially the case if learners are familiar with certain concepts and terms in their own language. However, such tests need to be valid and reliable in their own right.

- Assessment situations should not be isolated from the sociocultural context of the learner. For instance, in standardized tests, students are assessed individually and no help may be given or received. Many language-minority students are used to working together, particularly to help one another solve problems that require English reading and writing. By equating access to resources, peer assistance, and group work with "cheating" the assessment tool can overlook the strengths and coping strategies that language-minority students may bring to the classroom or workplace.

Relatively few classrooms use alternative techniques extensively. Teachers who feel that students must

get past "the test," often teach with it in mind, perpetuating curricula and instruments that are not applicable for LEP students. However, researchers in the field of assessment for language-minority students (including E. Hamayan and J. Damico, J.M. O'Malley and L Pierce, and M. Saville-Troike) are beginning to publish on this topic, and SCANS can be a source of support for alternative measures.

What Next?

The SCANS report *What work requires of Schools* and the later book *Teaching the SCANS Competencies* provides a great service to language-minority students in that it does not presuppose proficiency in oral English and U.S. culture, and its implication for assessment and accountability are free from linguistic and cultural bias. By explicitly addressing the needs of limited English proficient / language-minority learners SCANS is helping to promote the concept of equal access to educational opportunities for all American students. But now the ESL profession must take SCANS as seriously as SCANS took ESL. ESL books for both children and adult learners must explicitly show how SCANS skills, linguistically and culturally, address competencies for living and work. D. Price-Machado, S. Molinsky and B. Bliss and the author, among others, have started to address this issue. Hopefully in the near future, the gap between what is needed at work, in the community and at home will become smaller and smaller.

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